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ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

Clinical Impressions of Communal Child Rearing

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In approaching the problem of communal childrearing, my orientation is that of a clinician. I have worked with people living in communes for the past three years, and while my primary concern has been the physical health of the children, I have also been concerned with their emotional and behavioral development.

In this talk I hope to discuss some of the general problems involved in the study of communal childrearing, to review much of the literature dealing with the developmental effects of communal childrearing in Israel and America, and to supplement this literature review with my own impressions. While my data is impressionistic and anecdotal, at present there is little literature available on childrearing practices of contemporary American communes, and much of the literature that does exist is outdated and misleading.

At the present time, research in the area of communal childrearing is important for two reasons.

First, there has been recent criticism of the effects of the nuclear family on child development, and as a result there has been a recent movement toward various forms of multiple parenting. The most visible form of multiple parenting is the commune, but other forms, such as cooperative childrearing arrangements among professional families, are becoming more common. In addition, there have been recent attempts to develop cooperative child care as a viable alternative to the institutional care offered by day care centers.

Second, the rapid and continuing proliferation of communes has raised questions about the pathological effects of communal childrearing on children.

Suspicion and antagonism toward new forms of living and new values is a common human reaction. Communes have already felt such antagonism in the form of unjustified physical attacks on the commune by members of local communities, or of legal harassment and persecution.

It is important that we begin to investigate and understand the varieties of communal childrearing and their effects on children, and that we do not allow our present culture-bound theories of child development to be used as weapons against a new culture that is trying to establish itself.

In considering the area of communal childrearing in America today, we are not dealing with pure cases. There are many different problems and concerns.

1. The more general concern, as I have mentioned, is with the effects of multiple parenting on child development, and with the critical dimensions and variations in multiple parenting.

2. Many contemporary communes have a high rate of population turnover. This might represent a significant variable in the study of communal childrearing, both for the children who remain on the commune and for the children who move. One might expect a population turnover of 50% or more per year to have significant effects on attachment

behavior in a small commune.

3. Many communes are made up of a population loosely grouped under the label "hippies". It is important to understand what the childrearing attitudes and behaviors of this subculture are, and to distinguish between the effects of multiple parenting and the effects of the particular childrearing attitudes of this subgroup.

4. On the basis of personal observations of Israeli kibbutzim and of communes, it is clear to me that much valuable information is lost by assuming that all kibbutzim or communes have similar patterns of childrearing. Preliminary observations of a religeous and a non-religeous kibbutz suggested consistent differences in certain areas of childrearing and child behaviors.

Unfortunately most studies of kibbutzim have not looked at these differences, but have attempted to generalize on the basis of an individual kibbutz, or a cross section of kibbutzim.

As we begin to study childrearing in American communes, it is important that we look carefully at the differences between individual communes as well as the similarities.

5. It is important to consider the individual characteristics of the children we study in any attempt to understand the effects of communal childrearing on these children. Marcus, Thomas, and Chess (1969) have pointed out the importance of the behavioral individuality

of the child in child-environment interactions of kibbutz children. We should remember to consider these individual differences in our studies of children in American communes.

6. Medical problems, such as labor and delivery, or nutrition can have significant effects on development, and may introduce confounding variables in any attempt to compare communally reared children with non-communally reared children.

Before talking about my own experiences I will briefly review some of the relevant literature dealing with the development of children in the Israeli kibbutz.

While the kibbutzim differ from contemporary American communes along many important dimensions, they do provide us with a significant body of data on the effects of multiple parenting on child development.

1. Pregnancy and Childbirth. Pregnancy and childbirth in the kibbutz represent little problem. Nutrition and prenatal care are excellent, and the perinatal mortality rate is lower than the national average. (Infant mortality - urban 18.9/1000; rural 19.1/100; kibbutz 15.7/1000). Deliveries generally take place in hospitals, although the mothers generally stay in the hospital only two days.

2. Infancy. There is relatively little published data on infant behavior of kibbutz children. Gewirtz in some unpublished analyses compared the behavior of four groups of Israeli infants 2-8 months old. The four groups compared were kibbutz boys, firstborn boys, boys with older siblings, and institutionalized boys.

The response patterns of the kibbutz infants, on a variety of developmental tasks, were most similar to the response patterns of the boys with older siblings, and were quite different from the response patterns of the institutionalized children. Rabin (1965) tested slightly older kibbutz infants (10-17 months) on the Vineland Social Maturity Scale and the Griffiths Mental Development Scale. On both scales, the kibbutz infants performed significantly worse than the infants from an Israeli farm village. It must be realized, however, that the farm infants were tested with their mother present, while the kibbutz infants were tested in the presence of their metapelet (caretaker). Since the children are transferred to a new metapelet at nine months, and testing was carried out between 10 and 17 months, this might have significantly affected the response of the kibbutz infants to the testing situation.

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3. Childhood. Kaffman (1961) in a survey of the behavior disturbances exhibited by children in three kibbutzim of the Kibbutz Artzi movement found that thumbsucking was far more common than in the United States in the age group 3-9 years (kibbutz 41%; U.S. 15%-20%) although not in the age group 2-3 (kibbutz 24%; U.S. 27%).

Eating problems were far less common in kibbutz children (kibbutz 4%; U.S. 20% at age 6-12, and kibbutz 12%; U.S. 25%-35% respectively).

The frequency in kibbutz children of other behavior disturbances such as aggression, temper tantrums, enuresis, night fears, and speech problems were not significantly different from the frequency of such disturbances in a control population.

Rabin (1965) did not do direct observations of the behavior of kibbutz children, but did administer an extensive psychometric and projective testing program to kibbutz and non-kibbutz 10 year olds. At this age he found that the kibbutz children performed as well or better than non-kibbutz children on the intellectual measures. In addition "evidence concerning ego-strength, emotional and overall maturity and general adjustment favored the kibbutz children."

One recent article of some interest is an Society for Research in Child Development Monograph by Macoby and Feldman (1972) dealing with mother attachment in three year old children raised in kibbutzim or in nuclear families. They found no significant differences in mother attachment between kibbutz-reared and nuclear-family reared children.

4. Adolescence. Rabin gave additional projective tests to kibbutz adolescents, and found that intellectually kibbutz adolescents functioned as well or better than the non-kibbutz adolescents; in addition, kibbutz adolescents appeared no different from non-kibbutz adolescents in overall "adjustment," as measured by projective tests.

Rabin, Bettleheim and others have commented on the absence of delinquency, schizophrenia, and suicide in kibbutz adolescents.

There has been some concern expressed by observers of the kibbutz over the lack of a capacity for intimacy, the moderation of ambition and the repression of sexuality of the kibbutz adolescent.

It would appear however, from recent articles, that the above impressions were due to anthropological oversights. The description of kibbutz adolescents as emotionally flat and without depth has come from older professionals who visited the kibbutz. A recent paper by a younger observer who participated in regular activities with the kibbutz adolescents (Greenspan, in press) described them as "friendly and warm... curious, explorative, and (capable of enjoying themselves)."

According to Greenspan these kibbutz adolescents could be cold and aloof, but this was "not as much a personality trait as a reaction to a particular individual."

The repression of sexuality described by both Bettleheim and Rabin has been noted by Rabin to disappear once the kibbutz adolescent enters the army, and may result from the stresses of the incest taboo within the peer group.

The problem of ambition and "leveling" is not a simple one. The choice between individual and group needs can be difficult. Greenspan (in press) in a sensitive investigation of kibbutz adolescents, reported

in some detail on the factors affecting the choice to leave the kibbutz. To a large extent our culture ignores the conflict between individual ambition and societal needs, or resolves it through individual lecense and societal oppression.

The young kibbutz adults, says Rabin, "do not rebel against their society. On the contrary they feel rooted in it, expect to return to it following military service, and perpetuate its collective values in preference to individual plans and ambitions."

The literature dealing with communal childrearing in America is scarce and has generally not distinguished between different types of communes with respect to their childrearing practices. Much of it has been frightening and has created serious opposition to the commune movement on the part of otherwise enlightened officials. I will read a few excerpts from this literature before describing my own experiences.

Yablonsky, in the late 1960's visited several communes as part of his research into "the hippie trip." His impressions of communal childrearing follow:

"Another devastating problem seems to be the socialization of children....

"Parents in the hippie community are admittedly engaged in an intense search for identity and religious experience. This totally time-consuming effort that characterizes the hip community places

children, in many cases, in an abandoned position. People freaked-out, or even mildly loaded on drugs, are not in my judgment sufficiently stable to teach children what they need to know about life. They are much too egocentric and self-involved.

"Children in the communes tend to be viewed as playthings--toys for the adults to enjoy while they are engaged in mind-bending or mind-expanding pursuits. They are adored and adorned with affection and trinkets; however, in the communities I observed, they are not cared for with the basic necessities of food, clothes, and adequate health facilities."

Blois (1970), despite the fact that hippie parents scored significantly lower than non-hippie parents, on the pathologenic scales of the parent attitude Research Instrument, went on to say:

"Many characteristics of the hippie philosophy and personality have been associated with unhealthy parenting. The hippie is culturally maladjusted and alienated. His preoccupation with self, weak ego development, impulsivity, and use of drugs are not ideal parent conditions."

Smith and Sternfield (1970a,b) in two related publications on communal birth and child rearing described some of the characteristics of commune childbirth, including home deliveries without medication, the choice of non-western names for the children, and the prevalence of breast feeding and organic diets.

Neither article, however, made any attempt to evaluate the quality of parental-child interactions in the communes or to suggest what the effects might be on the development of the commune child.

I hope, at this time, to supplement the above reports with some observations of my own and on the basis of my observations to offer my own prognostication which are significantly different from those of Yablonsky and Blois.

My personal impressions are based largely on my experiences working with rural New England communes. I do not know whether these are significantly different from west coast communes at present, although they are significantly different from those visited by Yablonsky and others.

1. Pregnancy. The work of Pasamanick, McNeil, and others has demonstrated some of the effects of difficulties during pregnancy, labor and delivery on a child's development. Winnick and others have studied the effects of prenatal nutrition on development. Other reports have investigated the relationship between such factors as emotional support from husband or support from obstetrician and problems in labor and delivery.

Because of this, it is important to begin any consideration of childrearing in contemporary American communes with some consideration of events during pregnancy.

Patterns of sexual behavior and attitudes towards conception vary from commune to commune. Monogamy is more common than one might expect from various newspaper reports, but in some instances a conscious choice

is made to have a child whose father could be any male member of the commune. Such a decision ensures that the child will be a communal child, and will not be subject to the personal possessiveness of two parents.

Recent articles in the American psychological literature have emphasized the importance of the father during pregnancy and early development. The father provides practical and emotional support for the mother, as well as providing a model for male children. This emphasis on the role of the father may well be an artifact of our culture's nuclear family structure.

I have been generally impressed with the emotional and practical support given the pregnant woman and the new mother in the commune by the other women and men in the commune, whether the father of the baby was known or not.

In addition, it is important to remember that these children are not growing up in fatherless families, but in multi-father and multi-mother families, with many available role models for both boys and girls.

Nutrition during pregnancy also varies from commune to commune. Most of the communes I dealt with in New England were sensitive to the needs of the pregnant mother and made strong efforts to feed her adequately during her pregnancy. This was largely due to a cooperative group of commune members who met in a central location to discuss medical problems,

and traveled to the various communes to teach them about such problems as sanitation, nutrition and water supplies.

In other areas of the country and in communes following special diets such as macrobiotics or the mucusless diet, malnutrition during pregnancy could have adverse effects on the development of the commune child.

2. Labor and Delivery. In New England the majority of commune children are born at home without medication, with the assistance of a commune medic. While such home deliveries carry additional risks for the mother and child, many commune mothers prefer these risks to the expense and depersonalization of hospital deliveries. We know from the work of Brazelton (1961) that maternal medication adversely affects the baby's ability to nurse for the first four days. Whether this and other factors, such as separation of the mother from her infant, and use of forceps have longlasting effects on infant behavior is not known.

Often, as previous observers have noted, the entire commune is present at the birth of a child and participates actively in the process through chanting and singing. It appears on the basis of preliminary interviews, that those who participate in the birth process have a greater feeling of responsibility for the child and the mother. This may play a role in increasing commitment in communes, and also in ensuring psychological and physical support for the mother and child. In any case, the commune child's birth and earliest experiences are significantly different from those of the general population.

Two additional variables previously noted by Smith and Sternfield are names and non-registration. In their observations of West Coast communes they comment on the fact that the children were not given Anglo-Saxon or Judeo-Christian names, but instead were given names from Eastern mythology, astrology or other disciplines popular in the commune.

Abbot and Bruning (1970) reviewed the literature dealing with given names, and suggested that names may affect self-perceptions, personality development, and behavior patterns in both children and adults. If this is so, the uncommon, yet mellifluous names of the commune children might well have a significant effect on their development.

The effect of non-registration on a young child's consciousness is unclear, although objective effects may include absence from compulsory education, and avoidance of the draft.

3. Infants are handed to their mothers immediately after birth. They are generally breast fed and are kept with the mother most of the time during the first few days of life. The mothers often share caretaking responsibilities with other members of the commune. The infants I observed were well cared for and received much attention and stimulation from various members of the commune, although their parents generally acted as their primary caretakers. Health problems in infancy included the usual gastrointestinal and upper respiratory infections. The communes I worked with were quite concerned about the health of their children, and quite conscientious about giving them good medical care.

Because of this, despite primitive environmental conditions, the health of the commune infant has been good.

4. Childhood. There have been virtually no reports in the literature dealing with the behavior of the children raised in contemporary American communes.

My personal observations have largely been restricted to children growing up in rural New England communes, ranging in age from one month to six years.

I have done no formal testing, but have generally been favorably impressed by the adaptability, curiosity, and absence of any significant pathology in the children I have encountered. They appear to be spontaneous, open, exploratory, have few temper tantrums and little shyness.

The interactions between children and commune members was generally warm and affectionate, and occurred between various members of the commune and the children, although as a general rule the children interacted more frequently with their own parents than with other adults. Often one of the commune members would spend much of his or her time working and playing with the children.

5. Adolescence and Adulthood. My experiences with commune-reared adolescents and adults has been restricted to those raised in kibbutzim or religious American communes. Few of the children born and raised on counter-culture communes are older than five or six years.

I am however, far more optimistic than Yablonsky or Blois in my estimates of their eventual development for the following reasons:

(a) Kurt Lewin's emphasis on the totality of the child's environment--physical, cultural, intellectual and emotional--has been generally disregarded as research psychologists focused on childrearing patterns, and on mother-child interactions.

One striking aspect of commune children rearing is the life space in which the commune child grows up.

The commune children I observed were growing up on large farms, with fields to run in, and relatively few forbidden areas or objects.

In addition, they were growing up in a subculture with attitudes towards the world, and ways of interacting quite different from those of the larger society. In their environment people grew their own food, fixed their own cars, and built their own houses. People worked because work had to be done or because they wanted to work. In addition people were not evaluated on the basis of their achievements or degrees, but rather in some more complex personal way.

(b) Feitelson and Ross (1971) in an article on play, point out some of the factors important in the development of play. These factors, space, privacy, variety of materials, and peer or adult models, are all available to the child growing up on a rural commune.

Feitelson and Ross go on to point out the functions of play in socialization, maintenance of emotional equilibrium, cognitive development,

and the development of specific personality traits. They suggest that play may be more important than the acquisition of "specific learning" for later cognitive development.

If this is true the commune child's intellectual development may actually be stimulated by some of the same conditions that appall the visitor who would prefer a conventional school or child care center.

(c) Blois (1970) in his study of the childrearing attitudes of hippie adults found several differences between hippie adults and a control group consisting of inhabitants of the married student housing of two large west coast universities.

1. Hippies were consistently more permissive and less restrictive in their reported childrearing attitudes. They reported more respect for the child as a free, autonomous, and self-directed organism. The only exception was the suppression of aggression scale, on which hippies with children scored significantly higher than non-hippies with children.

2. A second difference reported by Blois was that hippies endorsed greater parent-child communication. They held more respect for the separate identity of the child, and intended to respond to the emotional as well as the rational needs of the child.

3. Hippies scored higher on the PARI rapport scales, reported by Schaefer & Bell (1958) to be related to prenatal warmth, openness, and capacity for overt affection.

4. Hippie mothers reported less maternal resentment than controls, while hippie fathers seemed more invested in their families than control fathers.

5. Finally, with the exception of the suppression of aggression scale, non-hippies scored higher than hippies on all pathogenic scales showing a significant group difference.

Blois was concerned about the discrepancy between hippie scores, and hippie childrearing as reported by Yablonsky.

My observations have suggested a much higher congruence between these values, and childrearing behavior on the communes I studied, which brings me to my next reason for optimism about the development of commune children.

(d) The members of the communes I worked with all expressed a tremendous amount of concern about their children. They felt that they had been raised in our western consumption-oriented, institution-centered, society and so despite their communal way of life were constantly engaged in a struggle with what they called "the pig in me."

They hoped to raise their children to be free of these ambitions and attachment, and so invested a lot of their intellectual and emotional energy in taking care of their children.

People learned to do throat cultures for strep throat; they started their own school, and they spent a large amount of time discussing the effects of their childrearing practices.

(e) An additional cause for optimism is an informal report presented by Dr. Emmanuel Bomse at the National Institute for Mental Health. As a result of his observations of communes in the Southwest, Dr. Bomse suggested that communes have a therapeutic effect on their inhabitants. He presented several cases of people, barely functional at the time of their arrival at a commune, who over the course of one or two years became intact, effective members of the commune.

I have observed similar transformations in some of the communes I've worked with and have been pleasantly surprised on at least two occasions to discover that communes which seemed at the point of dissolving in the fall, had survived the winter and were functioning significantly better when I visited them in the spring.

To the extent that individuals in communes, and communes themselves have a developmental history, it may be important to specify the age and state of individuals or communes being studied, and to attempt to study a cross section of communes in different stages of development. At any rate, it is important to remember that people barely able to care for themselves at one point in time may develop into effective members of a commune and adequate parents.

While I am optimistic about the development of commune children, there are things that I am concerned about.

(a) Marginal living conditions--I am sure that much of my concern in this area is due to my insulated middle class upbringing. Several

of the communes I worked with have survived hard New England winters in log cabins with wood burning stoves. So far the children have done quite well in these relatively primitive environments. There have been two commune fires, but no one has been hurt.

(b) A second problem, alluded to before, is education. As I mentioned previously, several of the communes banded together to form their own school. It was quite unstructured, however, and operated intermittently, depending on the availability of a building. Again, my concern may well be inappropriate. Two of the commune children attended public school last year without problems. Others attended a town summer school without problems.

(c) A third, more theoretical concern, is the effect of mobility and separation from parents on the children of the commune. The commune school that I mentioned previously was located first in an available farmhouse, and later in a large building connected with one of the communes. The children from the various communes lived there, returning home for brief periods, roughly every month. The school was run by a few permanent staff members, and rotating volunteers from each of the communes. As a result the children were always with people they knew. In a few cases symptoms characteristic of brief separation: clinging to the mother, whining, sleep problems, occurred after reunion of the children with their mother; however, in all cases these symptoms disappeared after the first few days at home.

In other instances, one parent or another, and occasionally both would be absent from the commune for a few days or weeks.

It is not clear what the effects of such experiences on the child's attachment behavior will be.

Which brings me to my last point. I was talking with a friend about the problem of attachment. "But we're not trying to teach our children attachment," he said. "We're trying to teach them non-attachment."

I've distributed some charts which outline the differences between the Puritan ethic and the Quaker ethic. I think you'll find, as I did when I first saw this chart, that most of my criticisms of the communes were from the orientation of the Puritan ethic, while many of the beliefs of the communards came from an orientation similar to the Quaker ethic.

It is important as we approach the study of communes that we realize which of our criticisms are in fact functional, and which of our criticisms grow out of our particular ethical orientation.

TABLE I

Puritan Ethic	Quaker Ethic
God transcendent (man anxious to prove himself)	God imminent (peace of mind)
Old Testament (Decalogue)	New Testament (Sermon on Mount)
Head (learning)	Heart (feeling)
Law Danger: legalism and rationalism	Love Danger: anarchy and mysticism
Elitism (elect of Saints)	Egalitarianism (that of God in every man)
Institution building	Anti-institutional (spontaneity)
Aristocratic (antimonarchical)	Democratic (anti-all heirarchy)
Representative democracy (majority 51% rule)	Direct democracy (sense of meeting, like "general will" of Rousseau)
Calling (great professional pride in ministry and magistry)	Calling (more like Thomism: to God rather than profession; exaltation of laymen and amateurs
Ideal man: magistrate	Ideal person: martyr
Evil: in sinful man	Evil: in corrupt institutions
Major vice: arrogance	Major vice: self-righteousness

-E. Digby Baltzell (1972)

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